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DELEUZE, GUATTARI AND MAY '68

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Paper at the Deleuze Studies conference in Copenhagen. It is basically a commentary on Deleuze and Guattari's short paper entitled "May '68 Did Not Take Place". I've used the translation of this text found in *Two Regimes of Madness*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (Semiotext(e), 2007) pp.233-6. I've only amended the translation found in *Two Regimes* in one place. Other works referred to are:

Felix Guattari *The Machinic Unconscious*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Semiotext(e), 2011)

Gilles Deleuze, "What is the Creative Act?" in *Two Regimes of Madness* trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (Semiotext(e), 2007) pp.317-329

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (Verso, 1994)

Deleuze, Guattari and May '68: "creative redeployments" as responses to crises

In this paper I will be discussing what Deleuze and Guattari's essay entitled "May '68 Did Not Take Place" tells us about their conception of creativity and of the state. For Deleuze and Guattari, May '68 did not take place because the "subjective redeployment on a collective level" that May '68 demanded was not allowed to happen. May '68 is not merely an unrealised dream, however, for Deleuze and Guattari. It is also an ongoing "crisis", an event that persists today: May '68 *did* not take place because it has not yet been resolved, it is not over, and the many changes and differences it has created are still indeterminate in that we do not know where they will lead.

The events of May '68 revealed that the *actual* capacity of the state for subjective redeployment was not enough, and so there was something wrong with the political system as it existed. I want to suggest that, from a Deleuzian point of view, this is still the case today: May '68 still poses a challenge to established political power.

Deleuze and Guattari suggest that "creative redeployments" are required if the crisis of May '68 is to be resolved. I will explain in what follows what Deleuze and Guattari mean when they tell us that "there can only be a creative solution" to the crisis: for one thing, they mean that we cannot trust the state to correct itself, even in response to political protest. Creativity is "resistance" for

Deleuze and Guattari, as I will show in this paper.

In "May '68 did not take place", Deleuze and Guattari write that

"In historical phenomena such as the revolution of 1789, the Commune, the revolution of 1917, there is always one part of the *event* that is irreducible to any social determinism, or to causal chains. Historians are not very fond of this aspect: they restore causality after the fact."

That is to say, a historian considers any event to be fully determined: if a historian cannot clearly see a determining cause for a given event then she will try to discover one. When looking back at *history*, we see all events as fully determined (even if we cannot work out the *precise* causes of any event we nevertheless assume that there are such causes). Every event in a historical account has happened for a reason. Deleuze and Guattari go on:

"Yet the event is *itself* a splitting off from, or a breaking with causality; it is a bifurcation, a deviation with respect to laws, an unstable condition which opens up a new field of the possible."

When Deleuze and Guattari write of the event "itself" they are talking of the event as something *present*: for Deleuze and Guattari, events that are happening *now* are partly *indeterminate*. An event is a point at which laws are allowed to change, where new laws are created. This runs counter to the historical view that would claim that all events occur in accordance with existing causal laws (that they are fully determined by causes that precede them). When we are faced with an event in the present we do not know where it will lead us: present events are much more confusing than historical ones as we cannot trace a causal path to the current event and beyond it. But Deleuze and Guattari write:

"Ilya Prigogine spoke of such states [of bifurcation and deviation with respect to laws] in which, even in physics, the slightest differences persist rather than cancel themselves out, and where completely independent phenomena resonate with each other. In this sense, an event can be turned around, repressed, co-opted, betrayed, but there is still something there that cannot be outdated."

So: for Deleuze and Guattari, the differences present in an unstable condition "persist" and do not "cancel themselves out". So it is not just that we do not *know* what has determined the present event and so cannot work out what its consequences will be: the event *really is indeterminate*, because events only occur where there is a deviation from established laws. Historians might want to say that they – the historians – are right because they see events clearly, once they have settled, while those present in an event are confused and cannot see it clearly; however, Deleuze and Guattari want to suggest that there is *truth* in this passing confusion, a *real indeterminacy* that historians (and historical thinkers) fail to preserve in their accounts. As Deleuze and Guattari write:

"Only renegades would say: it's outdated. But even if the event is ancient, it can never be outdated: it is an opening onto the possible."

It is this opening onto possibility that is not preserved by historians. Where a historian sees a failure, she will tend to conclude that this failure was inevitable, that this or that set of factors made it happen that way. But for Deleuze and Guattari, even an opening onto a possibility that was never realised will persist into the future.

"It passes as much into the interior of individuals as into the depths of society."

By this, Deleuze and Guattari mean to say that such forgotten differences and lost opportunities are preserved in the *unconscious* of individuals and society, in the unconscious ways that people relate to themselves and to each other. This is why a purely *historical* view of past events is dangerous: it misses those subtle changes in subjectivity and social organisation brought about not just by the monumental successes and failures of history, but also by the differences between these and the missed and forgotten opportunities that existed at the time. In *The Machinic Unconscious*, Guattari writes of the unconscious as "something that we drag around with ourselves both in our gestures and daily objects, as well as on TV, that is part of the zeitgeist, and even, and perhaps especially, in our day-to-day problems." (p.10) If we ignore the things that events (and the differences that arise in these events) force us to "drag around" we do so at our peril.

But Deleuze and Guattari want to distinguish between historical events and "pure events":

"And again, the historical phenomena that we are invoking were themselves accompanied by determinisms or causalities, even if they were of a different nature."

That is to say, historical phenomena are partially determined, and we *can* explain a great deal by exploring their causes. However,

"May '68 is more of the order of a pure event, free of all normal, or normative causality. Its history is a 'series of amplified instabilities and fluctuations.' There were a lot of agitations, gesticulations, slogans, idiocies, illusions in '68, but this is not what counts. What counts is what amounted to a visionary phenomenon, as if a society suddenly saw what was intolerable in it and also saw the possibility for something else. It is a collective phenomenon in the form of: 'Give me the possible, or else I'll suffocate...' The possible does not pre-exist, it is created by the event. It is a question of life. The event creates a new existence, it produces a new subjectivity (new relations with the body, with time, sexuality, the immediate surroundings, with culture, work...)"

So, "May '68" refers to something that interrupted "normal, or normative causality". That is to say, what defines May '68 is the fact that it interrupted the normal flow of things. This is what makes May '68 a "pure event": it came out of nowhere, so to speak. We cannot explain it by appealing to normal causality. Of course we can look at the conditions in which the students lived and against which they rebelled (no cooking in dormitories, rules about visitors and so on), and we can look at the conditions of the working classes in France at the time which the students wanted to change and which (eventually) led the workers to come out on strike, but none of this seems to adequately explain what happened. As Deleuze and Guattari write:

"When a social mutation appears, it is not enough to draw the consequences or effects according to lines of economic or political causality. Society must be capable of forming collective agencies of enunciation that match the new subjectivity, in such a way that it desires the mutation. That's what it is, a veritable redeployment."

May '68 is an event that is not to be explained by "economic or political causality" but by the attitudes of those who were involved. However it happened, by whatever minute and repeated adjustments to the social causality in which we live, people began to think of themselves – their relation to themselves and to others – differently. And it is this "subjective redeployment", this all-too-difficult to explain and non-historical change, that is the only explanation we have for the event of May '68. So although this new subjectivity must have come about through a series of subtle adjustments, it nevertheless *explodes* onto the scene, since it has no determinate economic or political cause: the minor adjustments that have led to this new subjectivity are imperceptible. People suddenly demand a society that would match their new subjectivity.

So what is a subjective redeployment? Deleuze and Guattari give two examples which they compare to May '68:

"The American *New Deal* and the Japanese boom correspond to two very different examples of subjective redeployment, with all sorts of ambiguities and even reactionary structures, but also with enough initiative and creativity to provide a new social state capable of responding to the demands of the event. Following '68 in France, on the contrary, the authorities did not stop living with the idea that 'things will settle down.' And indeed, things did settle down, but under catastrophic conditions. May '68 was not the result of a crisis, nor was it a reaction to a crisis. It is rather the opposite. It is the current crisis, the impasses of the current crisis in France that stem directly from the inability of French society to assimilate May '68."

May '68 differs from the "American *New Deal*" and the "Japanese boom" in an important way: in 1968 the government did not take the new attitudes of the people seriously, as something that society should cater for. What Deleuze and Guattari are implying here is that the New Deal and the Japanese boom were two cases where there was an appetite for change which political leaders and leaders of industry were then able to put into effect: subjective redeployment was something that you could see in action in society. But with May '68 the slogans of the students were not taken seriously, as indicating a real change in the way people as a whole thought about themselves (or more precisely: the way that people unconsciously apprehended themselves). So Deleuze and Guattari write:

"French society has shown a radical incapacity to create a subjective redeployment on the collective level, which is what '68 demands; in light of this, how could it now trigger an economic redeployment that would satisfy the expectations of the 'Left'?" French society never came up with anything for the people: not at school nor at work. Everything that was new has been marginalised or turned into a caricature. Today we see the population of Longwy cling to their steel, the dairy farmers to their cows, etc.: what else could they do? Every collective enunciation by a new existence, by a new collective subjectivity, was crushed in advance by the reaction against '68, on the left almost as much as on the right. Even by the 'free radio stations'. Each time the possible was closed off."

Again, the demands of the students and workers were not taken seriously: this led to a "marginalisation" or "caricature" of the ideas that emerged in May '68. We might say, for example, that the May '68 slogan "Be Reasonable... Demand the Impossible!" was taken as no more than a joke, with no serious demand behind it: it was not taken to be the expression of a new subjectivity that it in fact was. Only the demands of the trades unions could be understood: these at least were reasonable in a recognisable sense, and the state was able to accommodate them according to the tried and tested means of negotiation. Ultimately, though, most of those who were transformed in the event of May '68 have since been accommodated by the state:

"The children of May '68, you can run into them all over the place, even if they are not aware of who they are, and each country produces them in its own way. Their situation is not great. These are not young executives. They are strangely indifferent, and for that very reason they are in the right frame of mind. They have stopped being demanding or narcissistic, but they know perfectly well that there is nothing today that corresponds to their subjectivity, to their potential of energy. They even know that all current reforms are rather directed against them. They are determined to mind their own business as much as they can. They keep it open, hang on to something possible..."

"This is true of the entire world. What we institutionalise in unemployment, in retirement, or in school, are controlled 'situations of abandonment', for which the disabled are the model."

Because the subjective redeployments of these individuals are not recognised by society, the only way for them to survive and be in any way happy is to effectively drop out of society. And society accommodates these people by caring for them even though they are prevented from succeeding because of their "irrational" beliefs: they are watched over and cared for when they are in

school, when they are at work, when they are unemployed and when they retire, but their problems are *interpreted* as problems that the state is familiar with, since society has not recognised the “new subjectivity” of these individuals. Society views these people as incapacitated by their irrational beliefs, as lacking potential. Deleuze and Guattari conclude their essay by writing that:

“Europe has nothing to suggest, and France seems to no longer have any other ambition than to assume the leadership of an Americanised and over-armed Europe that would impose from above the necessary economic redeployment. Yet the field of the possible lies elsewhere: *along the East-West axis*, in pacifism, insofar as it intends to break up relations of conflict, of over-armament, but also of complicity and distribution between the United States and the Soviet Union. *Along the North-South axis*, in a new internationalism that no longer relies solely on an alliance with the Third-World, but on the phenomena of third-worldification of the rich countries themselves (for example, the evolution of metropolises, the decline of the inner-cities, the rise of a European third-world, such as Paul Virilio has theorised them). There can only be a creative solution. These are the creative redeployments that would contribute to a resolution of the current crisis and that would take over where a generalised May '68, and amplified bifurcation or fluctuation, left off.”

So what is a “creative solution” to the crisis of May '68? We have seen that, for Deleuze and Guattari, an event is something that is uncaused, because it is itself a change to the laws of causation. May '68 is a “pure event”, because it cannot be explained by economic and political causality and can *only* be explained as a result of a change in subjectivity, which was itself a result of repeated minor differences that have gradually, imperceptibly shifted the subject's relation to itself over time. It is the sudden arrival of a “new subjectivity”, sudden because its causes are imperceptible. But it is important to refer to May '68 in the present tense: it is an event that is still going on, because this subjective redeployment has not been allowed to occur on a collective level, and so there is still a tension between the subject of May '68 and the society to which she belongs. “Subjective redeployment on a collective level” has not been allowed to occur because the state has not recognised the new subjectivity: political protest is not seen as evidence of a new subjectivity but merely as demands for more pay, better conditions and nothing much more. In Deleuzian terms, the message of May '68 is seen by the state as something to be “communicated” to the powers of the state so that the state can accommodate the demands. For Deleuze, “communication is the transformation and propagation of information”. (“What is the Creative Act?” p.325) The problem is that May '68 has nothing to communicate: as we have seen, we do not know what “May '68” means, because it is a pure, present event and so is indeterminate. If we take the message of May '68 to be something communicable, then we take it to be something determinate and therefore take it to be something that it is not. By treating the children of May '68 as people who can be reasoned with by conventional means, the state is betraying these people by translating their demand for a new collective sense of subjectivity into demands for a better form of capitalism, for more of the same.

For Deleuze and Guattari, we still do not know where May '68 will lead: we are dealing here not with a determinate historical event but with a present, indeterminate bifurcation. But May '68 will only have an effect on the established order if the new subjectivity is translated into action that offers “resistance” rather than merely offering another opportunity for *communication*. In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari tell us that “to create is to resist” and that does not mean coming up with a utopia opposed to the current state of affairs:

“Utopia is not a good concept because even when opposed to History it is still subject to it and lodged within it as an ideal or motivation. But becoming is the concept itself. It is born in History, and falls back into it, but is not of it. In itself it has neither beginning nor end but only a milieu. It is thus more geographical than historical. Such are revolutions and societies of friends, societies of resistance, because *to create is to resist*: pure becomings, pure events on a plane of immanence. What History grasps of the event is its effectuation in states of affairs or in lived experience, but the event in its becoming, in its specific consistency, in its self-positioning as concept, escapes History.” (p.110)

Even utopian political programmes that purport to be opposed to the *status quo* in fact co-opt and betray the indeterminate idea of pure events such as May '68, by claiming that they have a historical determinacy. They oppose a false *idealised* version of the event to the *status quo*. For May '68 to succeed, the *indeterminate* force of the new subjectivity of the *idea* needs to be *put to work* in new and creative ways, rather than translated into a communicable ideal. Only in this way can revolutionary change be effected without compromising the radical and indeterminate force of the new subjectivity of May '68.

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